San Antonio Missions

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Mission San Juan

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thatched roofs of grass or hay. In 1767 a government inspector wrote, ". . . overseers or administrators are not needed . . . . The Indians themselves take care of the work in the cloth factory, carpenter shop, forge . . . and attend to all of the work that is to be done in the town. They are industrious and diligent and are skilled in all kinds of labor." The mission had brought about a revolution in the economy of the Indian tribes.

For about two generations the mission program instituted by the Spanish government on the fringes of its vast domain thrived, but around the turn of the century things began to change. On April 10, 1794, Commandante Pedro de Nava ordered partial "secularization" of Mission San Juan Capistrano. The decree stated that the Indians were to become proprietors of their own farmlands, caring for their livestock, and cultivating and planting their fields. They were to become self-sustaining. The mission no longer had a resident padre. Temporarily it became a visita (sub-mission) of nearby Mission San Francisco de la Espada, and occasionally a priest from there rode or walked in to San Juan for religious functions. In 1824, no longer an outpost of Spain but now of the new Republic of Mexico, the mission was completely secularized. The remainder of its lands were given over to citizens from the small community slowly growing around the old cluster of missions - people were beginning to call it "San Antonio."

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ESTABLISHMENT

Mission San Juan Capistrano was founded in 1716, not here but in present-day East Texas. It was established there for Nazonis Indians and named San José de los Nazonis. However, when Spain reorganized the northernmost defenses of her New World empire, the mission's moveable supplies were packed back here to the banks of the San Antonio River. On March 5, 1731 the mission was reestablished and renamed San Juan Capistrano. It grew as one of the cluster of missions strung like pearls on alternate banks of Rio San Antonio.

Missions were outposts of the Spanish Empire in North America. A mission had a church, for preaching the Spanish religion; it had workshops, for teaching Spanish crafts and customs; and it had labores, or farmlands, for teaching Spanish agriculture. For Indians gathered along the San Antonio River the change would be profound. The Coahuiltecans ("Kwa-weel-tekens") and other tribes near here were wandering hunters and gatherers. Changing them into farmers and sedentary craftsmen, with a new religion besides, meant changing their culture to its very roots.

MISSION ECONOMY

At first structures were temporary - even the church had a straw roof. The first priority was digging irrigation ditches and planting the fields. There were troubles. Terrible epidemics of smallpox and measles caused much suffering. There were Apache raids. Between the occasional disasters there were always administrative headaches, and some governors did not support the mission effort. But there was progress, and the mission slowly became self sufficient. Its economic bases were the farming and ranching operations. For farming, the first lines of the acequias (irrigation ditches) had been planned by the priests in 1731, and by the early 1740s the system was in operation. In the fields the priests taught the natives basic farming techniques of sowing, cultivating and harvesting crops.

Ranching was based at the mission's Rancho San Rafael de Pataquilla, 35 miles southeast, which handled some 1,000 head of cattle and 3,500 sheep. The operation was large enough to require a hundred saddle horses. Farm and ranch products in turn supported the crafts at the mission. Mission records report that by 1762 there was a granary, a large structure with stone and mortar walls. The textile shop had three looms and a well equipped weaving and spinning room. The Indian houses were of adobe, with

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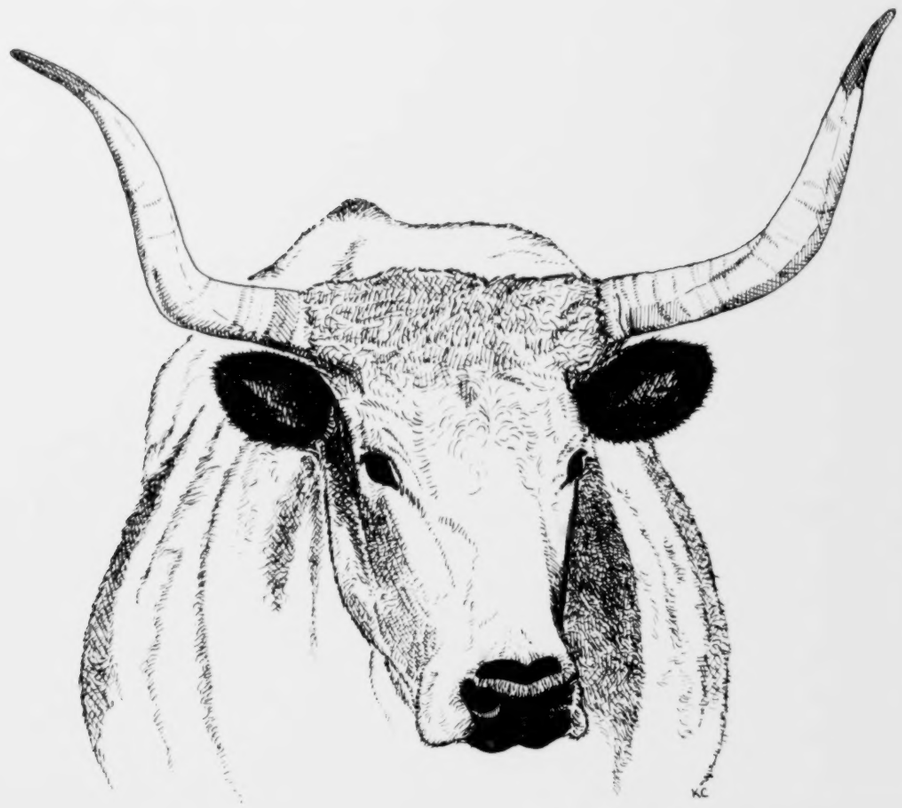
MODERN TIMES

San Antonio continued to grow, a city slowly engulfing the old mission which had been its beginning. During the second half of the 1800s San Juan's building deteriorated. In 1886 a storm destroyed the church roof, and the building fell into disuse. In 1909 it was repaired, and once again the community began to use it. During the 1960s it was extensively restored by the Archdiocese of San Antonio. Today, under a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the Archdiocese of San Antonio, the mission is still a living parish church and center of community activity, while part of San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. Every day visitors from throughout the world visit the quiet old buildings. They see not a dead past, but a living heritage.

-David Vela, Park Ranger



For your safety watch for low clearances in the historic buildings. Do not climb on the walls. Please help protect the structures, and do not pick up any artifacts you may see. They are protected by federal law, but more than that, they belong to our descendants who have not seen them yet.

All donations to the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park are greatly appreciated as they will help in the preservation of the missions. All donations are tax deductible and a tax form will be provided upon request.

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